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# Argentines May Go Ahead With the Bomb

In 1951, Juan Peron announced that Argentina had harnessed the atom, and a tremor of apprehension rippled around the world. Would this most terrifying of all sabers now be rattled by a strutting, second-rate dictator?

But it turned out that Peron's boast was based on the work of an erratic Austrian physicist who had worked for Nazi Germany before fleeing to Argentina. The apprehension turned to ridicule, and for a while Argentines became the butt of nuclear jokes.

The jokes are no longer funny. Argentina has some world-class nuclear scientists, all the necessary technology and soon will have enough nuclear material to make the bomb.

Some time before the Falkland Islands crisis, a secret State Department report warned: "Argentina's capability in the nuclear field, announced plans for a national nuclear industry and prospects for nuclear growth, including eventually a nuclear weapons capability, remain a source of concern for the United States."

In fact, President Carter was so

alarmed that he stopped all nuclear sales to Argentina. This didn't slow the Argentine program. The Canadians, West Germans and Swiss were eager to provide assistance.

To become energy-independent by the year 2000, Argentina figures it needs six nuclear power plants. The first one, built with West German help, is in use; the second, a Canadian venture, is due to open this summer. The third, another West German project, is to open in the mid-1980s.

The Swiss, meanwhile, have agreed to build a heavy-water plant for Argentina that has U.S. intelligence experts worried. Combined with the materials and knowhow they already have, this plant will enable the Argentines to control the full cycle of technology needed to produce nuclear bombs.

In fact, a plant to be built near Buenos Aires will be able to reprocess spent nuclear fuel into plutonium. This is the stuff of which nuclear bombs are made.

Equally disturbing is the fact that Argentina's nuclear program is run by the navy. And although the head of the program, Adm. Carlos Madero, has repeatedly stated that Argentina does not plan to build a bomb, the country's refusal to join international non-proliferation and inspection programs is ominous. Madero contends that Argentina has had the technology to build a bomb since December, 1970, but hasn't.

The CIA has estimated that 1979 was the "earliest technically feasible date" that Argentina could have had a nuclear "device" in hand, and reckoned that it would take a much longer time to produce nuclear weapons.

The CIA added that, "Any attempt to actually fabricate and-or test a nuclear device will come only after the country has considered the political and strategic situation and is desperate enough to accept the consequences . . . ."

Intelligence sources told my associate Dale Van Atta that the CIA now estimates that it would take Argentina three years to build a bomb. But they added that the Defense Intelligence Agency thinks it could be sooner. Argentine officials, questioned privately, agree, saying they could do the job in six months.

The big question, of course, is whether the Falklands situation has made Argentina "desperate enough" to forge ahead with a nuclear weapons program. There are some indications that they're at least getting ready to make a decision.

For example, the CIA reported last year that there were signs that Argentina was planning to trade raw uranium to China for enriched weapons-grade uranium. South Africa, which has an active nuclear-weapons program, has a secret arms-cooperation agreement with Argentina. And the Soviet Union agreed in April to sell at least 45 pounds of enriched uranium to Argentina.